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Student Engagement with LinkedIn to Enhance Employability

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Abstract

Social networking sites are an increasingly important tool for career development: LinkedIn particularly, is a site for business professionals, focusing on business connections and industry contacts for employers and professionals. Often however students don't engage with LinkedIn as they consider it too 'profession focussed.' There is a lack of awareness also about how they can use the platform to enhance their employability. Whilst recognising previous works on social media for teaching and learning in HE, this chapter examines the challenges facing students in respect of engaging with LinkedIn for career progression. It identifies the efforts that students make in building and maintaining networks, in becoming part of professional networks, via willing engagement. This chapter contributes to knowledge about LinkedIn, from a professional development point of view, offering suggestions to help students and tutors make the best use of LinkedIn, to improve both student engagement and subsequent employability.

Keywords: LinkedIn, Social Media, Student, Engagement, Employability

Introduction

In a rapidly changing world, the role of social media for building and maintaining networks cannot be overemphasised: millennials are the social media generation, and this is influencing most of their activities, including job searches. Acknowledging that the job-searching strategies of millennials are changing (Smith, 2018), and that social media is being used widely in recruitment processes (El Ouirdi, Segers, El Ouirdi, & Pais, 2015), it has been argued that LinkedIn serves as a channel for recruiting and selecting candidates (Ecleo & Galido, 2017). As universities are both recognised and ranked for their rates of graduate employability (Hall, 2017), it is important to understand the role of LinkedIn in building student networks and improving employability. Noting previous research on LinkedIn in HE (McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012; Gerard, 2012; Peterson & Dover, 2014),

this study moves beyond the use of LinkedIn for class assignments, to consider how well students engage with the platform after receiving their grades, to identify the efforts students put into building and maintaining their networks when their tutors are no longer watching. It aims to highlight the challenges of using LinkedIn and offer recommendations for tutors in terms of improving student engagement and employability. It is important to note that LinkedIn is not the only means of improving employability: it is part of a holistic approach towards enhancing opportunities. Students are encouraged to get on LinkedIn to drive up engagement and interactions as they prepare for work. The role of tutors in using LinkedIn to enhance employability cannot be overemphasised however. The focus is on tutors to initiate the process and chart a pathway for students: it is however the student's responsibility to engage.

LinkedIn for Student Engagement

Social networking sites are an increasingly important tool for career development (Baruffaldi, Di Maio, & Landoni, 2017). LinkedIn, as a site for business professionals, focuses on business connections and industry contacts for employers and working professionals (Statista, 2018). With 500 million members worldwide and 250 million active users, it is one of the most popular social networks. There are 40 million students and recent college graduates on LinkedIn, with three million active job listings (Aslam, 2018). Through it, members may create, manage and share their professional profile online, and build and engage with their professional network (LinkedIn, 2018) and it is considered more effective than Facebook in the recruitment process (Nikolaou, 2014). Engaging with the platform builds relationships and is crucial to unlocking opportunities including new jobs or career advice (Shreibati, 2017). UK universities are aware of what LinkedIn can offer and generally encourage students to create a profile. The main concern, however, is how well students engage with this platform *after* they have created their profile. Often it appeared they were not interested, and unwilling to put much effort in (Mogaji, 2018). Arguably, many students see social media as a mere platform for entertainment and socialization (Sobaih, Moustafa, Ghandforoush, & Khan, 2016) which may explain to some extent their relative lack of interest in LinkedIn. As Dixon-Todd, Ward, and Coates (2015) further noted, students tend to consider engagement largely in terms of what happened within the classroom. They may, therefore, not necessarily be

interested in activities which may be perceived as 'invasion of their privacy' by the university.

The Personal Tutor's role

UK Universities have always made efforts to support and enable their students to achieve their potential via personal tutoring (Watts, 2011). Often this involves having a member of the teaching staff support the student throughout their time at university, giving them academic support and pastoral care, to help them develop a rounded and deepened skill set. Research has recognised the importance of personal tutoring as an important tool of student engagement, student retention, progression and achievement. Grant (2006) considered it crucial to providing all-inclusive guidance and support. Por & Barriball (2008) also noted that personal tutors are akin to counsellors and career advisors, deeply interested in their students' progress. It may be argued therefore that personal tutoring is not the same as being a lecturer: it is a distinct and well-defined role that should not be subsumed into other academic tasks or roles. The role of personal tutor goes beyond that of a lecturer and encompasses pastoral, academic and administrative elements. There are specific responsibilities. As Phillips (1994) observed, there are three main areas, namely, teaching, counselling and supporting students. Supporting the students in enhancing their employability skills is however increasingly key. As such, this chapter aims to encourage personal tutors to adopt LinkedIn as an additional tool. Watts (2011) acknowledges that personal tutoring is used throughout UK universities, but may operate differently within them.[1] Often, students remain with the same personal tutor throughout their degree (Stephen, et al., 2008), and may be required to create a LinkedIn profile as part of Personal Development module or portfolio. Some students may then cease to take any interest in maintaining their profile.

The Challenges of LinkedIn

The benefits of LinkedIn in enhancing employability are well known, however there are challenges that can undermine these benefits. This section highlights the challenges

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[1] At the University of [Authors' affiliation], first-year undergraduate students are enrolled to a 15-credit course called Professional and Personal Development (PPD) which runs for 12 weeks. The Personal tutor takes this course in a weekly small group tutorial with about 15 students called personal tutees.

students are facing with regards to using LinkedIn for enhancing employability, building their network to increase their social capital, and creating engaging content to stir up conversation.

Unfamiliarity with LinkedIn

A survey of online population profile in the UK (by BBC and Ipsos MORI) revealed that 75% of 16 – 22 year-olds use Facebook compared to 8% who use LinkedIn (emarketer, 2018). Unlike Instagram, Snapchat or WhatsApp, it seems that LinkedIn is a form of social media that students are not very familiar with. Lack of experience in the use of social media (Manca & Ranieri, 2016) can be a significant limitation for students exposed to a new platform and for tutors trying to incorporate it into their teaching. Unfamiliarity with LinkedIn can inhibit students and tutor interest especially in respect of enhancing employability. Moreover, it can be challenging for those students who are uninterested in social media but made to sign up for it: students and faculty staff can be overloaded with information, finding it distracting and perhaps struggle to use the site as intended (Manca & Ranieri, 2016).

Building their Network

For those students who are more familiar with the platform, and create a profile (whether to pass an assessment or engage with a professional network) building networks can still be a challenge. It is key for students to build networks to increase their social capital, by connecting with various people on the platform: challenges attach to the quality and quantity of those whom they add, however, given the prevalence of 'spam' and 'bot' accounts. Students may simply be connecting randomly for the sake of increasing numbers. Building a network is not however primarily a numbers game (Fisher, 2016). The question of connecting with tutors similarly cannot be ignored. Peterson and Dover (2014) discourage this practice, suggesting that tutors might well be swamped with mandated connections, which then might not be well received. And yet the presence of one's tutor on the platform can motivate students to engage more fully, especially where

the tutor is treating the platform as a professional platform (with no private matters discussed).

Engagement

Students are expected to stay 'in the loop' to make the best use of the platform. They clearly need to know when job vacancies are being advertised, to connect with potential recruiters or a mentor. Often, students are encouraged to post on their profile, to make comments on relevant topics, and to join groups and discussions. They must be strategic however in engaging and in building worthwhile connections. Peterson and Dover (2014) give particular credit to students who start a thread, acknowledging that it is sometimes more difficult for students to post a well thought out question than one might think.

Content Creation

Closely linked with engagement is content creation. It is important to create valid content to enable engagement with others, e.g. writing articles, sharing pictures and making comments (Gerard, 2012). The challenges in creating content have been acknowledged: personal tutors might well be expected to put actions in place to help students with content creation. In addition, students need to be made aware of their audiences: who are those who might be interested in their statuses? With whom are they communicating? And what would the audience find most useful on their platform? Often a student's network is made up of other students: if issues discussed in class are posted and shared however, these may become visible to other professionals. It is important therefore to be aware of the potentially very wide reach of social media, not just in terms of immediate contacts but also for larger audiences.

Self-Branding

Some students are not in employment: those who are 'in work' may well be employed as, for example, a part-time waitress, bartender or nanny. Putting work experience on LinkedIn to align with their career objectives is important, not least in relation to how they might be describing themselves in their job role. Some tend to describe themselves as students whilst others opt to use their part-time job title. This is also closely related to

how they highlight their other accomplishments. Even though they may not yet have any publications or patents as an indication of achievement, students must find a way to showcase something unique about their own personal brand.

Recommendations for tutors

These challenges notwithstanding, it is important to remember that every new, meaningful connection could lead potentially to new employment opportunities. This section offers suggestions aimed at debunking negative perceptions about millennials' job attitudes (and at LinkedIn itself) by arguing that tutors must lead the initiative. The role of tutors in enhancing student employability is multi-faceted: they will have to do their best to encourage students to engage more fully with LinkedIn, promoting greater awareness of the long-term benefits of doing so.

Personal tutors should have a profile

Whoever wants to lead, must lead by example. Personal tutors should have a profile and be conversant with how it works, so that they can encourage the students. If tutors are not engaging on the platform, students may see no reason to join in. Tutors can share their profile in class – a screenshot displaying different sections for example would encourage students to sign up. That said, there are arguments against tutors sharing their profile: if tutors are not actively job-hunting, they may see no need for a LinkedIn profile. Although students use social media for peer interaction, staff might not wish to join in such conversations. There is a need to be mindful of professional boundaries and the tensions which exist between having 'personal' or social connections and maintaining professional responsibility as an academic tutor. Veletsianos and Kimmons (2013) have reported the lived experiences of faculty members within social networking sites, suggesting that there is a tendency for conflicts to arise between their professional identity and social networking. Manca & Ranieri (2016) further highlight a key concern about privacy, which may well discourage some tutors from adopting social media platforms within their teaching. It should be noted however that LinkedIn is not just for active job seekers but allows for the building up of a viable professional network. Students can clearly benefit from such networks, for example gaining potential insights and

recommendations for employment, finding visiting lecturers, and meeting industry experts online.

Personal tutors should discuss and engage

Personal tutors need to do their best to encourage their students to engage with the platform. This means looking beyond the mere getting of grades via completed assessment tasks. Tutors should specifically ask during meetings about the student's LinkedIn profile, and check on progress. Tutors should also access their students' public profile and aim to evaluate it critically: as Por & Barriball (2008) argued, personal tutors are essentially critics and career advisors, who can closely influence and monitor student progress. Who then is better placed to give an honest opinion about a student's public profile than the personal tutor, who wants to see their tutee succeed? They can give advice about the way that they might have branded themselves, on which profile picture they have used, and on how best to enhance a profile. Recruiters are not obliged to provide such feedback, but tutors can share success stories of former students who have successfully used the platform. Similarly, developing greater student confidence in using the platform to its optimum advantage requires time and active participation. Rather than attempting to cover everything in one term or session, the plan should be a longer-term one (McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012). Tutors should also engage with their students on the platform, as professionals, liking their comments, or sharing and commenting upon their updates, to build student confidence and promote engagement. Successes can be noted when they meet students in the class. For example, if LinkedIn informs you that a student has got a job or an internship, it is good to bring that relationship offline. Lecturers should be able to nurture the engagement process further by monitoring students' online activities and commenting both online and in-class (McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012).

Tutors should nurture

It should also be noted that some students may not really be interested in social media generally. They may not own a smartphone or have sufficient storage space to install another application which could hinder how fully they might engage on the platform. Thus, technical limitations like memory size, battery life, high line costs and a small

screen may hinder using mobile technology as a learning tool (Alzaza & Yaakub, 2011). Tutors need to highlight these challenges and find ways of working around them. Insofar as students need to build their networks, it is also important to be mindful of the online connections that they are making. Tutors should bring to the attention of their students the dark side of social media: LinkedIn is no exception. There is an increasing number of internet users who are concerned about negative online experiences (Ofcom, 2018). Unacceptable behaviours include the sending of unsolicited promotional messages, misleading posts and statuses, and anything of a sexual nature (Thomas, 2015). Tutors can also raise awareness of the need for self-branding on LinkedIn. They should not default automatically to '*student at University of …*' as a headline. Headlines show up in search results and can determine whether or not some someone clicks through to the student's profile (Morgan, 2015). Foss (2018) further considers the headline as the most overlooked LinkedIn profile section, suggesting the need for students to be creative with their headlines and to use important keywords which speak directly to the audience. Avoidance of such terms as "specialise" and "passionate" is to encouraged, given that they are amongst the most overused buzzword by millions of LinkedIn users both within and beyond the UK. (Barber, 2018).

Tutors should share resources

Tutors can play a key role in curating relevant information and sharing it with their students. This could be industry news that is relevant, or perhaps connecting them with a person of interest that can be a mentor, or sharing job openings and vacancies. This is another opportunity to engage more fully with the student tutee: they may find a tutor's content highly relevant to what is being taught in the classroom. Neary (2000) advises personal tutors to encourage the reflective practice by students, to better understand the connections between theory and practice. Moreover this is not just for the students' benefit as it also raises the profile of the tutor, pushing their work to the forefront of people's minds when it comes to finding new opportunities and establishing reputation and expertise (Miller, 2017). Sharing also keeps tutors informed about the latest trends, ensuring that experience and skill sets are updated (Dayton, 2016).

Conclusion

This chapter considers the important nature of LinkedIn in terms of professional networking, highlighting one university's efforts to incorporate it into teaching, learning and career advice. Students may not find it engaging (or entertaining enough) to join in with, or might consider it as merely another medium for interaction with classmates. In terms of enhancing employability, personal tutors are often best placed to ensure that students fully understand the various benefits of this platform and how they can best utilise, looking beyond its use as an in-class assessment over a few weeks. Understanding the challenges that students face, in terms of self-branding, building up relevant links, and engaging meaningfully with the network, is also key to high-quality employability tutoring. Tutors (and careers or employability advisers) should also be seen to be using the medium themselves for example to share their work, and stimulate further discussions in class. Higher education administrators will similarly want to ensure that their initiatives for improving graduate's prospects yield significant results. Regular appraisal of student engagement is needed, although the onus clearly remains on the student to make the best use of the opportunities offered.

So far, there is no known alternative to the professional social media site that is LinkedIn. Any championing of LinkedIn must however address its pedagogical stance, and ask whether it risks weakening the traditional roles and remits of tutors and students (Manca & Ranieri, 2016). Arguably, it does not. Given that social media is here to stay, its place within learning and teaching cannot be ignored, nor can its significance be overemphasised in our digital age, with 80% of LinkedIn members regarding professional networking as important to career success (Shreibati, 2017). Students need to be made aware of this platform, as a way of developing their digital, interpersonal relationship skills outside of Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat which often do not add much in the way of value to their career prospects after graduation. Facebook and other social media sites can be used for class interactions, but LinkedIn clearly lends itself to improving the employability of students, to developing communication and networking skills that will be useful in getting a job, internship, or graduate role. It allows students to position themselves for prospective job offers, to engage in active networking and join in the conversations happening within their professions or industries.

Even though job search networking is one of the most successful ways to secure employment, it can be perceived as an intimidating activity. This is where tutors (and administrators) can make the process a bit less daunting, for example by highlighting the tangible benefits of building an online network, and by securing mentors who can help students and graduates with their career development. Ultimately, students have a key part to play in enhancing their own employability. There is a clear need for them to invest significant time and effort in activities developed by their tutors: where tutors have provided opportunities for students to build their network and gain relevant skills, students still need to take responsibility for their own learning. Clearly, a useful platform has been provided, but students must make sure that they put effort into achieving their desired aims.

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